

How to Study

Tips for Advanced French Courses

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I. **Allow enough time** for your studies. As college students your full-time job is your education. As you may have heard me say before, I expect at least as much work as you would put in working full-time at a fast-food restaurant! That means at least an 8 hour day. If we spend 2-3 1/2 hours per day in class, you should be spending a minimum of 4 1/2 - 6 hours a day on your regular class preparation. I have geared my assignments accordingly. Most of you can handle about 10 pages of prose in French per hour. So most daily assignments will average around 50 - 60 pages of prose, counting some reading time on weekends. Be sure to give yourself enough time for adequate preparation.

II. **Do not compare** your fluency, reading speed, or oral abilities with your classmates. Because our classes are small and group together beginning literature students with more advanced ones, each of you is at a different stage in your development in French. Each of you has different strengths and weaknesses. I will evaluate you in terms of your own progress, and in terms of your efforts, as well as in terms of your contribution to the course.

III. **Work to develop good reading habits.** Here are some general strategies you can use.

A. Read the entire segment (page, poem, act, scene, chapter) first without looking up any words. See if you can get the general drift of what the author is saying.

B. Then go back and read shorter segments (stanza, paragraph) and be sure you have understood what is going on. Jot a note on paper or in the margin. Look up only the key words absolutely needed for comprehension.

C. After you have read the entire assignment, write down any questions, portions you didn't understand, words you don't know. Go back and see if you can find the answers. If not, make a note to ask the next day in class.

D. Develop your ability to guess intelligently words or phrases you don't know. For instance, see if the word is related to a word you do know. Ex. Un savant is related to the verb savoir. Use the context to help you. For instance, if the work is about a knight, you might guess that the word "armure" means armor, and not need to look up the various words for parts of the armor.

E. Consult only a good, complete dictionary, preferably a French (as opposed to a French-English) dictionary. If you don't already own one, consider buying one. You should also own a basic reference grammar. Use it!

IV. Strategies for reading novels

Novels present the problem of sheer length, and therefore require a reading strategy very different from other genres. In most of my courses (and other professors may be different in this regard), I want you to read fiction with an eye toward characterization and theme, rather than details of style. Part of your growth as a student is in learning how to determine which passages are important to the development of theme and character, and which are less important. In some instances I will ask you to read a given passage very carefully, to look at aspects of style. But in general I am concerned with the broader picture. Therefore, you should not be looking up every word, or worrying about every single sentence.

Instead, read by paragraphs. At the end of each paragraph, ask yourself (a) was this paragraph primarily concerned

How to Study:
Tips for Advanced French Courses
Page 2

with action, with description, with characterization, or with theme; and (b) what is the main idea of the paragraph. If you can answer these two questions, and feel you have a good sense of that paragraph, jot a note in the margin, or mark any questions you may have, and go on to the next. While this process may seem tedious at first, it will quickly become unconscious and automatic, and will assist you in deciding which passages you need to re-read and which you have understood sufficiently to continue reading.

Every "segment" -- chapter, scene, etc. -- that you finish, make a quick note in the margin of the main incident, etc. so you can find it again.

Look up only those words absolutely essential to meaning, or those words which seem to recur often. Do NOT write in the English word in your text. Instead, keep a vocabulary notebook for yourself with those words you have looked up.

V. Strategies for reading poetry

Poetry presents several challenges to students. First, it is often very condensed, with many ideas in a single segment. Second, it is often figurative, rather than literal, using many metaphors, etc. Third, poets often use an archaic, or very formal vocabulary quite different from ordinary speech. Finally, for reasons of rhyme or rhythm, poets may alter the normal word order of the sentence. Each of these traits causes special difficulties for students in a foreign language.

In contrast to prose, therefore, it is important to know all the words in a poem. Therefore, I suggest you read through the entire poem first to get the general idea the poet is exploring. Then, go back through the poem and see if your general understanding coupled with intelligent guesswork can help you understand words or phrases you missed the first time. Finally, go back and read it carefully, looking up any words you still don't understand. It may be necessary to rewrite a sentence in "normal" word order if the poet has changed it. Finally, ask yourself if the poem "makes sense" as you have read it, or if there are places where the poet has shifted from a more literal to a more metaphoric or figurative language. What are the metaphors and to what do they refer? Remember, poetry often plays on two or more meanings of a word, so be sure to read all the possible meanings of any words you do look up and see which ones seem to fit the rest of the poem.

VI. Strategies for reading drama

Plays are meant to be acted on stage. Therefore, there is only minimal description of the stage setting and costume, and all the emphasis is on dialogue and action. Ideally you should read plays aloud, imagining what actions the characters would do as they say the lines. In general, you will have less difficulty with vocabulary in modern theater, since characters are often using conversational speech. However, in older theater written in verse, you have many of the same difficulties presented by poetry. Again, use your guessing skills to good advantage!

VII. Strategies for reading essays

The essay, like the novel, depends more on ideas than on the kinds of special effects we find in poetry. In addition, the essayist usually follows a logical development of ideas which makes it easier to see the relation between one paragraph and the next. Things you don't understand in one paragraph are often clarified in the following paragraphs, so it is important to read through the whole essay first, before starting to look up words. It is also very important to note the main ideas in each paragraph so you can see the structure of the essay. Separate out exposition of ideas from examples used to illustrate those ideas.